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COUNSELING CHILDREN IN GROUPS.

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COUNSELING IS AN ACCEPTING, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP DEALING WITH NORMAL CHILDREN AND EMPHASIZING THE COUNSELOR'S SPECIAL ABILITY TO LISTEN, EMPATHIZE, AND UNDERSTAND. THE SETTING OF GROUP COUNSELING PROVIDES EXCELLENT CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING. EFFECTIVE GROUP COUNSELING INVOLVES TREATMENT BY THE GROUP AS WELL AS INDIVIDUAL TREATMENT WITHIN THE GROUP. COUNSELORS MUST BE AWARE OF HOW GROUP MEMBERS' COMMENTS AND ACTIONS INFLUENCE OTHER MEMBERS. THE SELECTION OF YOUNGSTERS FOR GROUP COUNSELING SHOULD BE BASED UPON THE TYPE OF PROBLEM (STUDENTS WITH SIMILAR PROBLEMS SHOULD NOT BE PLACED IN THE SAME GROUP), READINESS FOR COUNSELING, THE CHILD'S IMPACT ON OTHER GROUP MEMBERS, AND HIS PARENTS' SUPPORT. GROUP COUNSELING METHODS MUST BE MODIFIED FOR USE WITH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN (FOURTH, FIFTH, AND SIXTH GRADERS). SUCH GROUPS REQUIRE MORE STRUCTURE AND SHOULD BE MORE LIMITED IN TIME AND NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS. THE COUNSELOR PLAYS A MORE ACTIVE ROLE, AND SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE FROM TEACHERS AND PARENTS IS NEEDED OUTSIDE THE GROUP. ROLE-PLAYING IS AN EFFECTIVE METHOD FOR THIS AGE LEVEL. AS VERBALIZATION IS DIFFICULT FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN, MORE PLAY MATERIAL IS NECESSARY. TEACHERS MAY USE GROUP TECHNIQUES TO MOTIVATE LEARNING AND TO PROVIDE INDIVIDUALS WITH AN OPPORTUNITY TO RELIEVE A SPECIAL PROBLEM THROUGH ROLE-PLAYING. THIS IS ONE OF THE REPORTS FROM THE ZION CONFERENCE AND THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DEMONSTRATION CENTERS INCLUDED IN "ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GUIDANCE IN ILLINOIS." (PS)

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# ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GUIDANCE IN ILLINOIS

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# COUNSELING CHILDREN IN GROUPS

Merle M. Ohlsen *

In this paper, Doctor Ohlsen discusses four aspects of group counseling: (1) the counseling relationship and process, (2) selection of clients, (3) ways of adapting the treatment process for most effective use with children, and (4) ways of adapting group techniques for teachers' use.

## The Relationship

Counseling is an accepting, trusting relationship between a counselor and one or more clients. One of the unique characteristics of the relationship is the counselor's ability to listen--to make a deep personal investment in each client, and at the same time to maintain separateness. When he is at his best, the counselor can feel deeply with a client without experiencing countertransference. Moreover, he is able to convey to his clients his commitment to them and his expectations from them. Such a relationship wins the confidence of clients and enables them to discuss problems which, heretofore, they were unable to discuss, and, perhaps, were unable to accept as their

Another important characteristic of the relationship is the counselor's ability to understand his clients. He uses his knowledge of the counseling process, of human behavior, and of each client and his environment to try to understand each client's problems as the client sees them and to help each client to understand the forces at work within himself and his environment. At the same time, the counselor recognizes that insight by itself is not sufficient, and for many clients it is not necessary; these children learn to behave differently without understanding why they have problems.

As this writer sees it, counseling is a service which is provided for normal children. It is designed to help them cope with problems they meet in growing up. When these youngsters understand the relevance of counseling services for them, they seek help early, and, consequently, often prevent serious mental illness late.

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In contrast, the writer uses the term psychotherapy to describe a therapeutic experience which is provided for emotionally disturbed persons within a medical setting. In other words, the writer differentiates between the two treatment methods in terms of the persons treated and the setting in which they are treated rather than by the nature of the treatment itself. Furthermore, persons treated by a counselor do tend to focus their attention on the present and to discuss only those past experiences which seem to have relevance for present problems. If, however, the counselor or therapist is to have any real impact on the other persons' lives, he must be able to establish a permissive, accepting, and understanding relationship with those whom he attempts to help. He must dare to become deeply involved with them in order to help them.

For group counseling to be fully effective there must be treatment by the group as well as individual treatment within the group. Clients learn to help others as well as obtain help for themselves. All of the competencies required of the counselor in individual counseling are required here, and more too. Besides trying to understand the client who is speaking, to capture his feelings, and to help him express his feelings, the counselor must observe how the speaker's comments, as well as the various members' nonverbal behavior, influence each of the other members. He also must select clients with care, taking account of their possible impact upon each other, enlist their assistance in developing a therapeutic atmosphere, and teach them to function as co-counselors.

The setting for group counseling meets the optimal conditions for learning described by Seeman (1963): "It is a safe environment; it is an understanding environment; it is a caring environment; it is a participating environment; and it is an approving environment (p. 8)." Clients also perceive counseling as a place where it is safe to be open, honest, and frank -- where it is safe to test their ideas and the solutions to their problems and where they can obtain frank evaluations of their efforts to change. Whenever he is given an opportunity to do so, the counselor also should

try to help teachers develop Seeman's optimal conditions for learning within their classrooms. With reference to improving learning conditions within a classroom, Seeman concluded his paper as follows: "All of these attributes, of course, have one thing in common. They all involve close contacts with the students. If each of us relates to our students in these ways, I think that we will have done all that a person can reasonably do to motivate high achievement (p. 8)."

## Selection of Clients

Based upon their experiences with predelinquent boys (13-15), Stranahan, Swartzman, and Atkin (1957) concluded that youngsters who profited most from group counseling had a degree of flexibility, a desire for growth, some capacity for insight, and some experiences early in life with an authority figure who possessed a measure of steadiness, helpfulness, direction, and maturity.

hildren who can profit from group counseling include shy children, children who have difficulty participating in class discussion, children who want to make friends, and children who have better ability than their performance indicates. Usually the last type needs help in accepting their ability before they actually improve their performance. Rarely is it advisable to include in a single group only one type of client, e.g., gifted underachievers. Usually, they can best be treated along with some other children who can accept their ability and are concerned about why they are not doing better than they are. Ohlsen (1964) reported that best results were obtained when, after describing group counseling to children, more children volunteered than could be included in the next group to be begun. Under these circumstances prospective clients tried harder to convince the counselor in the intake interview that they were ready for counseling and that they really had something to talk about in the group. As they tried to convince the counselor that they should be included in the next group, they increased their own readiness for counseling.

For every group a counselor must carefully select clients. He must be permitted to accept only those clients whom he feels reasonably certain that he can help, and preferably only those who want to join a group after they have learned what will be expected of them and what they can expect from others in their group. Even after a group is organized the counselor must feel free to take an unproductive member from the group or reassign anyone who does not seem to fit into the group. Both Fiedler (1949) and Broedel, Ohlsen, Proff, and Southard (1960) found that even a single blocking client can sometimes take such an antitherapeutic stance that its members never establish a therapeutic climate.

For this reason, it is strongly suggested that the counselor consider not only a given client's readiness for counseling but also his impact upon the other members of the group. He also must decide what type of assistance each child needs and how it can best be provided. When the child seeks help the counselor usually begins with an interview with the teacher or parent. Usually, he supplements his interviews with the pupil, his teacher, and his parents with a careful examination of the child's cumulative record, and sometimes he will observe the child in his classroom and/or on the playground. Besides helping the counselor get to know his prospective clients, and assess their readiness for counseling, this individual interview gives them a chance to reveal what is bothering them so that later they can discuss it more easily within their counseling group. Since the typical elementary school child requires only a few individual sessions in order to help him and his teacher and/or parents identify and remove his blocks to learning, group counseling will not be economical for all children. When a counselor decides that a child can be helped by three sessions or less, he usually would not assign such a child to a counseling group. However, there will be occasions when the counselor elects to work with a child on an individual basis, and later decides that he is a child who can best be helped in a group.

For group counseling to be effective with even upper-grade elementary school

children, Ohlsen and Gazda (1965) concluded that both pupils and their parents must understand what will be expected in the counseling groups and accept these conditions. Sonstegard (1961) obtained significant results with similar clients, but he also provided group counseling for the pupils' parents and teachers. Where this is not feasible, or possibly not even necessary, Ohlsen and Gazda suggested that at least regular consultations with parents and teachers are essential. Their under-achieving fifth graders discussed many situations in which they felt that they had been treated unfairly and there was nothing that they could do about it. A fifth-grade boy described his feelings as follows: "We're just kids and don't count for much; even our dogs are treated nicer than we are". "Whereas adolescents are able to help a peer convey to the person who has hurt him, how he has been hurt, and to help him do something about his situation to improve it, fifth graders feel trapped. They lack the independence and the adolescent's repertoire of social skills to cope with life's problems. Hence, the important adults in their lives must accept considerable responsibility for helping them cope with problems and improve their environment (Ohlsen and Gazda, 1965, p. 81)

## Adapting the Treatment Process for Children

The writer's counseling experiences and research with groups at the University of Illinois indicate that though the same basic principles of counseling apply to all ages, the counselor must adapt his techniques to his clients' social and emotional maturity, their previous experiences in groups and the development of their communication skills. Work with fifth-sixth-seventh-and eighth graders clearly suggest that the discussion type of counseling that was effective with high school and college students also worked well with seventh and eighth graders, but certain changes were recommended for fifth and sixth graders (and these probably apply to fourth graders):

1. These younger children need more structure and more carefully defined limits. Even when they are carefully selected for a group, they have difficulty defining limits and enforcing them as the committed older children do. They must

understand what is expected in group counseling and how this differs from what is expected in their classrooms.

2. Associated with the need for more structure, Ohlsen and Gazda (1965) concluded there seemed to be a need for more active participation on the counselor's part than was required in an adolescent group. These younger children did not seem to be able to detect and reach beyond mere talk to respond to significant therapeutic material as Ackerman (1955) indicated that his adolescents were able to do. Though their ability to do this increased over the treatment period, and they were able to gradually accept more responsibility for helping develop a therapeutic climate, fifth- and sixth-graders required more time to learn to do this than did adolescents. Furthermore, when the counselor failed to participate enough, especially during the early sessions, the clients became restless, were easily distracted, and often competed for the counselor's attention. His participation included more structuring, more responses to therapeutically significant material and teaching them to use such techniques as role playing.

3. Though these children do have some ability to empathize with peers, as Lerner (1937) reported, they have difficulty maintaining a sustained interest in another's problem. Consequently, Ohlsen and Gazda (1965) concluded that these children should be treated in smaller groups (perhaps five or six instead of seven or eight) and for shorter periods of time (perhaps forty to forty-five minutes instead of an hour). They also recommended three meetings a week instead of two.

4. Ginott (1961) reported that prevailing practice in clinics is to separate boys and girls for treatment during the latency period. Ohlsen and Gazda noted that in their group, girls were more mature, exhibited more interest in boys than boys did in girls, tended to threaten boys with the discussion of topics related to sex, were more verbal, and tended to dominate discussions. Hence, though

they generally favor the treatment of mixed groups, they conceded that it may be wise to treat girls and boys of this age in separate groups. However, they admitted that they had some reservations concerning this recommendation: the group is a good place for boys and girls to deal with these antagonistic feelings and to learn to relate with each other.

5. These children need more than verbal interchange to express and cope with their problems. Outside of their group they need the understanding and assistance of teachers and parents to solve their problems. Within the group they often need to act out as well as talk out their problems. Role playing is effective whenever a client has difficulty describing a situation or conveying to others how he feels about it; or he wants to obtain others' reactions to his way of meeting a situation; or he feels that he needs practice in meeting a situation (Ohlsen, 1964, pp. 174-178). This method seems to be one of the most effective ways of helping fifth and sixth graders. Puppets also may be used with them effectively, especially when the group develops the skits to be portrayed by the puppets. Other play materials such as family dolls, finger paints, and sketching paper may be used with these children, but care must be taken in selecting the materials lest the children perceive use of these materials as "kid stuff".

Finally, the writer would like to consider briefly how a counselor may work with primary school-age children in groups. Though this writer believes that the normal children with whom he has worked can put their feelings in words better than many authors have indicated, special attention must be given to communicating with these children. Since this is discussed in another paper it will not be discussed again here (Ohlsen, 1965). It will suffice to say that more use should be made of play materials than was suggested above for older children. A short description of a counselor working with five first and second graders illustrates how these children can be

helped in groups. All of them tended to be shy and two were having difficulty learning to read. Before they entered the rooms, the counselor had laid out sheets of brown wrapping paper, finger paints, modeling clay, and various sizes of dolls--some dressed as adults and others as children. When they came into the room, each selected the materials of his choice and sat down to play. Provision was made for the children to sit around a long table in a large office which was used as a playroom. One of the girls and two of the boys chose to play with finger paints. The third boy played with clay and the remaining girl played with dolls. As the children played the counselor moved about, responding first to one child, then to another. As he watched a child play he would try to determine what the child was trying to express and respond to him in the child medium -- e.g., if the child was playing with finger paints he would respond to him with finger paints. The children were also encouraged to interact with each other. Occasionally, one would speak to the entire group--a sort of show and tell. When necessary the counselor helped such a client get the attention of the entire group. He also tried to convey to his clients that not everyone was expected to speak to the entire group just because some wanted to do so. Although normal children do seem to express themselves verbally better than disturbed children, counselors are urged to take note of Ginott's warning: "Many serious mistakes in child therapy are committed by adults who try to give verbal insight to children whose language is play. Forcing them to verbalize is like compelling them to converse in a foreign language." (Ginott, 1958, p. 413).

## Teacher's Use of Group Techniques

Most elementary school teachers are interested in their pupils as individuals, and many are already using group discussion techniques. They exhibit this interest in their pupils by listening to them when they bring problems to school and by encouraging them to talk about their interesting experiences--e.g., by show and tell sessions and by giving them a chance to role play situations that trouble them.

The teacher's guidance responsibility is to listen and to try to understand--to let his pupils know that he cares about them and that he will set aside time to give them a chance to discuss special topics that concern them. When his pupils begin to discuss topics that the teacher feels should not be shared with the entire group, he arranges private conferences with individuals or small groups. On the other hand, he should not be expected to do counseling. It should be reserved for persons who are qualified to do it.

Recently, Rogge (1965) did an excellent demonstration to illustrate how a teacher can use group methods to motivate learning. What he did was to set aside time when pupils were given a chance to ask any questions they wished. Rather than merely answer their questions, he helped them explore where they could find the answers to their questions and helped them talk about how they felt about each other's questions. Often, pupils can answer each other's questions. In order to further excite learning when someone has answered the question, he may ask them still further questions.

Since some teachers doubt their ability to field such questions, and to deal with the embarrassment associated with some questions, they often need help in learning to apply Rogge's methods. He usually begins with a demonstration in the teacher's classroom. After they have discussed it, he encourages the teacher to try it with him, observing. Usually he encourages the teacher to make a recording of the discussion so that he will have specific responses to discuss in helping the teacher critique his own session. Teachers also can help each other critique tape recorded sessions of such discussions.

Role playing (some call it sociodrama) is another group technique that the classroom teacher can use. It differs from "playing house" or "playing school" in that it is an organized effort to teach pupils to cope with specific problems. It provides the pupil who requests assistance with an opportunity to relive a specific problem, to express his feelings about it within a safe emotional climate, to test his ideas for

coping with the problem, to obtain his classmates' and teacher's ideas for solving his problem, and to practice these solutions interacting with people whose reactions he values. In fact, when he describes a situation and the people involved in it, tells how he feels and how he thinks they feel, directs and participates in the scene role played, and answers his classmates many and varied questions before playing the scene, he usually understands better himself and the whole situation even before he role plays the scene.

"For example, Robert, a second-grader, was beaten up by Mike, a fifth-grader, during the lunch period. After helping Robert clean up, Miss Pickens suggested that perhaps the class could help Robert figure out how to cope with Mike. Since Mike had been picking on several of the small boys in the neighborhood, this ideal appealed to the pupils. They set the stage for the sociodrama by having Robert describe what happened during the incident. Then members of the class volunteered for the various roles; several children volunteered for their own roles. The others in the scene were briefed by Robert. Finally, Miss Pickens pointed out that though they should try to reenact what happened, they should not worry about saying precisely what was said before--instead, they should try to say and act as they felt their characters would. When Miss Pickens thought they had gone far enough into the scene to help Robert, she interrupted and asked Robert to tell what he would have done differently and suggested that he ask questions about the issues which concern him. Then she gave the other players a chance to comment on how they felt about what happened and to make suggestions to Robert. Finally, she gave the rest of the group a chance to express their feelings about the scene and to offer Robert suggestions. Not only did Robert get many good suggestions, but all of them obtained ideas for coping with bullies." (Ohlsen, 1959, pp. 640-641)

Thus, group techniques can be used effectively by teachers too. Though there are many questions for which no one has answers, much can be done to help children in groups. Lack of qualified personnel is probably the most serious problem facing

school leaders who want to initiate group counseling programs. These personnel are added to counsel pupils and to help teachers improve their competencies in working with groups.

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